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ABSTRACT

Although it is satisfying and fulfilling to be part of the professional conversation on English teaching, and to have had one's writing published in journals, two difficulties should be noted. First, the notion still persists that it is publication alone that validates the writing experience. Second, it is wrong to encourage teachers only to write professional articles. Recently, it has become more acceptable to use stories to illustrate concepts in professional teaching articles, a welcome and helpful change in a theory-laden field. Stories are often the best mode for explaining difficult concepts, and, in a sense, the living are kept alive through stories. One girl's story about Italian immigrants entering New York in 1914 displays the magical, myth-like qualities that good storytelling is able to invoke. The story, called "The Wooden Pony," greatly moved her teacher-writer father, whose own father had come to America from Italy and whose treasured wooden pony carved for him as a keepsake by a boyhood friend, provided the basis for the tale. The teacher father rewarded his daughter by having a toy wooden pony, like the one in the story, carved for her. The poignancy of both the tale and the writing experience of the girl demonstrates the passion that allows writers to become totally immersed in their stories. Teachers as writers should allow themselves to experience such immersions quite apart from the professional articles that make up most of the writing produced by educators. It is good, occasionally, to pursue the written word with a reckless abandon, to pay respect to perceptions and feelings, and ideas, the great respect of exploring them through writing without regard to whether it is published or not. (HB)

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THE TEACHER CELEBRATES WRITING

Presented at the mini-workshop (Friday, November 20, 1992): "Celebrating the Middle-Level Language Arts Teacher: We Can Have It All," sponsored by the Junior High/Middle School Assembly of NCTE. 82nd Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, Louisville, Kentucky, November 18-23, 1992.

Last spring NCTE published an important book for teachers--Teacher As Writer edited by Karin Dahl (1992). The articles urge teachers to write, proposing strategies for keeping writing going and offering tips for entering the professional conversation through publishing.

It is, indeed, satisfying and fulfilling to be part of the professional conversation in English teaching beyond faculty rooms and conferences like these, to have your language and thinking published in journals. I've been part of this conversation since 1975, when my first article was published in The Ohio English Bulletin, published after I sent it there on the recommendation of Stephen Tchudi--then the editor of English Journal--who had written me a personal, uplifting, encouraging letter of rejection; and enclosed with that letter the addresses of thirty regional journals.

But I have two quibbles with the notion of teacher as

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writer, quibbles about matters that are often assumed when talking about teachers doing writing. My first quibble is about publishing.

A few weeks ago I was in the process of reviewing my last book as the "Resources and Reviews" editor for English Journal: Creating the Story: Guides for Writers by Rebecca Rule and Susan Wheeler (1993). While reading this excellent book about teaching fiction writing to older students, I found myself resisting the authors near the book's end in the chapter on publishing. After more than 200 pages of encouraging writers to take risks, of imploring them to write honestly and passionately about characters in trouble, the authors give a nod to elitist notions of who should write fiction. They inject this note of practical, competitive-market realism:

> If after you've had about fifteen stories rejected fifteen times each, then perhaps it is time for you to climb a mountain by yourself. Ask yourself: Do I want to continue to write fiction? Is my work good? Do I still believe in what I'm doing? This is a long, lonely, soul-searching climb. If your answers are yes, don't give up" (249).

Fifteen stories, fifteen rejections each. Most of my fiction writing students at Utah State University will not get to that point. Most of them are not seeking to make their way in

the world as fiction writers. But even so, I resist the authors' implication that it is publication alone that validates the writing experience, that your act of creation with language is not of itself worthwhile, that any intrinsic pleasure you take from writing stories, from becoming completely absorbed in a fictional dream, is not worth the time--if the story is not published.

A young adult novel I've written has now been rejected nineteen times. I long for its publication, of course, but publication, I must remember, is not what made creating the novel so valuable to me. The work itself made the experience gold, writing each morning in my tiny room in a graduate student dormitory at the University of New Hampshire, only aware of the snow falling outside my window when I inadvertently looked up from the computer screen. Otherwise, I was totally absorbed by intense concentration, blissfully lost in language and image. I never lived better.

For this reason alone, writing--whether fiction, drama, poetry, articles, reviews, journal entries, or letters--is a worthy human endeavor. Our lives are enriched by the doing. So, too, can the lives of our students be enriched by the act of writing. Their human experience can be enhanced. Not long ago I received a letter from Diane, a former student of twelve years ago. She married out of high school, and now is busy caring for three children and making a home for the family. She can't seem to write anymore, she tells me. Even when she has a story to

tell and sits down to write, "the phone rings, the kids start arguing, the baby starts crying, or my husband can't find his socks."

Diane mourns the loss of her time to write. And here is a big reason why: The very first lines of her letter read: "I used to be a writer, or at least I thought I was. I may not have been that good but I felt good doing it."

The act of writing enhanced Diane's human experience.

She was particularly good at telling stories, I remember. And that brings me to the second quibble I often have with "teacher as writer"--I object to encouraging teachers only to write professional articles. Writing is a big world mural. It is composed of many genres and hybrid genres. And we write for many purposes. I don't want <u>any</u> writers to feel they must restrict themselves to one genre, especially teacher-writers, who are nurturing students to try their hands at many kinds of writing.

Only in the last fifteen or twenty years has the telling of stories been respected in professional teaching articles. It's about time. Stories offer a vivid and compelling way for teacher-writers to connect with their inner voices and to write passionately about subjects that matter to them. We can deeply understand the meaning of our real and imagined experience by writing the significant, sensory details that make stories real to us and to our readers should our stories happen to find some form of publication. In Diane's stories, for example, she

provided details that built throughout the narrative, and then, in the final lines, she often echoed the most significant of those details. The effect was a startling moment of recognition.

Through telling our stories we come to know that which is significant in our lives. Stories help us experience the abstract, not just understand it. Linda Rief's Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents (1991), a wonderful book published by Heinemann, is full of significant stories about one teacher, her students, and their work. Those stories give flesh to her discussions of preparing lessons, the importance of projects, portfolio evaluation, and the relationship between visual art and language arts.

Good writers use stories to illustrate heavy-duty theory, to make abstract discussion palpable. As a reader, I always appreciate that. But stories work in another way, too. The telling of stories leads us to abstract ideas during our writing. You know of students who freewrite about a piece of literature, and for ten minutes they retell the story in minute detail. Then--in the final lines--they blurt out what the story means to them. Through the writing they lived through the story; they had the kind of deeply felt experience with literature that Louise Rosenblatt (1978) calls for. And that experience taught them.

Years ago when my daughter Mariana was in fourth grade, she decided to do her "country report" on Italy, the birthplace of my father. Mariana thought that the best place she could get information on Italy would be from her 87-year-old great uncle

Gigi, who had been born in Caprarolla near Rome and had immigrated to America when he was eighteen in 1913. At one point Mariana asked Uncle Gigi why he decided to come to America. I quote from the audio tape Mariana made of the interview:

> A man I work with once ask me three, four times the same thing you ask me.
>
> He say, "Gigi, what make you come to this country?"
>
> I say, "Wait a minute. You ain't red in the face."
>
> He say, "What do you mean?"
>
> I say, "You're not an Indian. What make you people come to this country?"
>
> He say, "My daddy was born here."
>
> "Oh, your daddy was born here? How 'bout your grandpa?"
>
> "Oh, I don't know, he come 'cross."
>
> "Same thing I come 'cross," I say. "You make a better living, a better home, a better life."

Uncle Gigi told Mariana a story to help her understand his motives for coming to America sixty years earlier. He told her the story he experienced that enabled him to understand why he had left his mother and brothers in Caprarolla. Why had he come to America? To "make a better living, a better home, a better life."

If you've read my book Clearing the Way (1987), you know how

important my daughter has been to helping me understand matters of literacy and living. Just last spring when she was spending a semester in Italy, she helped me further understand the importance of stories in our lives. Here is the beginning of a letter she wrote to me while she was on spring break:

> Dear Papa, I'm on a train to Spain--we're about an hour away. For the past day or so I've been into [Tim O'Brien's] The Things They Carried. I feel heavy after reading that last chapter. O'Brien is so hip to so many things. I saw so many lessons in this book, not only about Vietnam, but how important it is to write and to tell your stories and to listen to other people's stories. So many times this book brought tears to my eyes. For some reason this book reminded me of you--the relationship with his daughter and the importance of his need to just tell this story. And here's where one lesson lies . . . about your story--it brewed for 25 years--you never really told it until you wrote the novel. The death of Grandpa was a personal torture for so long--I know it's frustrating when you get rejections, but some people just don't' want to listen to other people's stories. It doesn't mean they aren't good, and sometimes they have to be told to be dealt with. You told it and so many people in your family [read your book] and understand--me and mom understand; Grandma Mae and Aunt Nancy can sigh with relief because they can

relate. Maybe your story can help them tell their stories . . . . I felt O'Brien was trying to get all these messages across. Stories have to be told to keep people alive in a sense--even the person who is living has to be kept alive through stories . . . ."

Certainly, when the stories we tell, the writing we do, is read by others--whether through journal, magazine, or book publication or an immediate publication with friends, relatives, or colleagues--human experience is enhanced beyond the central and irreplaceable pleasure we take from the act of writing.

Late one evening three years ago, Mariana stepped into the room where I sat before the computer. She was eighteen and in the last month of her senior year of high school.[1]

"Will you listen to my story?" she asked.

Closing in on some writing of my own, I turned my head to her but kept my fingers at the keyboard. Mariana wore sweats. Her blonde hair was clipped back from her forehead. Her contact lenses were soaking in a heat sterilizer for the night, and her glasses had slid halfway down her nose. She looked weary. Track practice had been longer than usual.

Mariana held a dozen sheets of ragged-edged notebook paper she liked to write on with soft-leaded pencils. I knew those pages were the draft of her final paper for senior English. She

had been thinking about this assignment for months, researching here and there, gathering information and impressions, asking me questions about my family. Since her late supper of microwaved leftovers, she had been in her room, lying on her bed, filling pages with her looping handwriting.

For this assignment Mariana's teacher had asked the students to research a particular year or era, and then--instead of composing traditional research papers--to write short fiction that incorporated details from their research. Mariana had made the assignment her own, had chosen to research Ellis Island and 1914, the year my father, then a boy of nine, immigrated to the United States from Italy.

Mariana dropped to the floor and sat cross-legged to read me her story. I removed my fingers from the keyboard and swiveled around to face her. She began, turning the pages sideways at times to read words written in the margins, looking closely other times to make out words she had squeezed between lines.

"Felice felt he was drowning in the ocean of people," she read. "He closed his eyes and tried to breathe. He could feel the small wooden pony against his heart and remembered Luca. Tears welled in his eyes but he swallowed them this time. Giuseppe would call him "bambino" again and hit him. Felice wanted to be strong too, and he wanted to be able to stand up to Papa like Giuseppe said he was going to."

Elbows on my knees, chin resting in my hands, I gazed down at my daughter, then let my eyelids close. I entered the

fictional dream Mariana had woven of my father, his two brothers, sister, and mother as they shuffled along in a crowd, moving off the ship that had brought them across the Atlantic Ocean. Filomena, the youngest child, slept in her mother's arms. Antonio, the youngest boy, cried and held his mother's skirt. Giuseppe, the oldest child, carried himself bravely, almost disdainfully, as he moved toward American soil. And Felice, my father, was between his brothers, but closer to Antonio's tears than Giuseppe's defiance. The wooden pony Felice kept in his shirt pocket had been carved and given to him by his friend, Luca, before the family left the village near Naples.

In her short story Mariana explored a mystery she'd been aware of for years--the great influence on our lives of my father, he dead then twenty-five years, the myth-like story of his family's immigration to an America decades away from fast food restaurants, designer jeans, and alternative rock music. She conjectured in her fiction, too, inventing detail, action, and characterizations that cannot be corroborated by family members, but that carry the illusion of reality, nevertheless.

Mariana's research in books had not been extensive. A half dozen times, however, she had watched the opening of Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather II--another story--the scenes when the Italian immigrants enter New York harbor, are awestruck by the statue of liberty, and disembark at Ellis Island. These images had shown Mariana early twentieth century America and the look of frightened, hopeful immigrants. The images spurred her

imagination, bringing new vividness to the stories told and retold by members of our family, stories I'd heard my father and aunts and uncles tell when I was a boy sitting at the dining room table after a traditional Christmas Eve supper, stories that rolled from their tongues in the quiet fullness after the meal, stories that sparked further stories and drew my beloved relatives into debates about events, people, and memories.

During those fleeting hours of storytelling, I sat transfixed, asking questions that prompted an uncle or aunt to retell some incident or maybe, just maybe, reveal some bit of information I'd never heard before. And when my uncles and aunts and father slipped into the assured rhythms of reminiscence, I hoped that the telephone would not ring and that no one would knock at the door. Carefully, quietly, I refilled glasses with the dry red wine my uncle made each year. I wanted nothing--not an empty glass, not an unexpected call, not a glance at the clock--to break the spell of telling.

Mariana leaned forward, reading slowly, treating her language with great respect, adopting a colloquial tone when she read dialog. Her sincere, urgent voice rolled up to me from the floor and entered my very bones. I'd never imagined my father as a boy at the moment he arrived in America, never imagined that he may have left a best friend in Italy, that his sister may have slept and younger brother may have cried. Because of "The Wooden Pony," Mariana's fictional dream woven of image and story, language and imagination, I would never think of my father in the

same way again. Mariana read the final lines:

> Felice looked past Mama and met the gaze of Giuseppe. He watched two tears roll out of his older brother's eyes and make their varied path down his face.
>
> The two brothers stared at each other, expressionless.
>
> Felice grinned. "Bambino," he whispered.
>
> They laughed silently together. Felice patted his heart and thought about the future.

Mariana looked up to me and saw my eyes filled with tears.

A day or two after that evening I thought of buying Mariana a carved wooden pony for her high-school graduation. I had no luck finding such a present in area stores. I remained optimistic, though, since I was traveling a good deal. On trips to Calgary, Toronto, Montana, and New York, I found wooden bears, raccoons, wolves, seals, whales, moose, but no wooden ponies. Not even wooden horses.

My mother-in-law saved the day. She knew a wood carver, a long-time friend, who agreed to whittle a wooden pony for me. I sent him a copy of Mariana's short story so he could generate his own vision. But before he began his wood working, he suffered a heart attack and underwent triple-bypass surgery.

Two months later I learned that he still wanted to carve the pony, that he and his wife, in fact, thought the work would be good therapy for him. By this time it was mid summer.

"Are you getting me something for graduation or not?" Mariana asked.

"Be patient," I told her.

The following year, ten months after she had written "The Wooden Pony," Mariana was home from college for spring break. The day before she headed back to school she and her mother went shopping. When they were gone, a small package arrived in the mail. I opened it and pulled out an object wrapped in tissue paper: a stiff-legged, blockish wooden pony. I turned it over in my hands, touching the ears, running a finger along the smooth back. I stood the pony on the kitchen counter. I was disappointed; it looked amateurish.

I found a note from the wood carver's wife. "Merle wasn't happy with the way this turned out," she wrote, "but our ten year old grandson loves it and wanted to take it home. We thought it might be just the thing Luca would have carved for Felice."

Precisely, I thought.

Mariana arrived home from shopping in a flurry, dropping plastic bags to the floor and plopping down to open them. I sat reading.

"Open that package on the counter," I said to her.

Mariana was busy removing skirt, sweater, and shoes from the

bags.

"What's in it?" She laid the sweater against the skirt on the floor and eyed the combination.

"Just open it," I said.

"I will in a minute." She spent a moment more with her new clothes, then walked to the refrigerator and opened a can of soda pop. Finally, she turned to the package. Her eyebrows were pursed, troubled, as I had often seen my father's. From the package Mariana lifted the object. The tissue paper fell away. She held the wooden pony in both hands, her eyebrows raised in startled surprise. She glanced across the room to me. And this time, this time it was her eyes that filled with tears.

Mariana got passionate about imagining the story of my father's arrival to America seventy-six years earlier. I got passionate about telling the story of her story, about how this assignment using a non-expository genre enabled my daughter to immerse herself in the act of writing, to get lost in the language and the world she was creating, to engage in an optimal psychological experience.

I believe firmly in teacher as writer, not <u>just</u> in teachers writing professional articles, and surely not in the elitist idea that writing that isn't published isn't worth anything. I believe in the value of teachers engaging in the act they want students to engage in, in experiencing the psychological delight that can come with using language on paper. I believe in

teachers telling the stories that are meaningful to them, the stories they are passionate about, wherever those stories occur--in school or out.

For the last half hour, I ask your good faith participation in joining me in writing about what matters to you. I won't be asking you to get into groups to share what you write, although I value that activity. First and foremost in these next fifteen minutes, I want you to use language, your evolving personal voices, to pursue what matters. It might be a specific detail, an indelible image, a fragment of unforgettable conversation, an overwhelming feeling about something or someone.

If you need to do a little brainstorming of topics or images before you start to write, take a few minutes to do that and begin writing when you feel language building in you. Just remember--proceed in the brainstorming and the writing with reckless abandon. "Faith and fearlessness," I tell my students. As William Stafford (1986) advocates, lower your standards as much as you need to in order to get language on paper. Take the pressure off. This is not a test of your intellect, not a rating of your talent. This is fifteen minutes to pay great respect to your perceptions and feelings and ideas, the great respect of exploring them through writing.

NOTES

1. The text relating Mariana and "The Wooden Pony" will appear as part of an article in a forthcoming issue of English Journal.

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